

The Real Causes of America's Wars, Lecture 6

Vietnam

Conflict in Postwar Goals

- Vietnam after WWII was marked by a conflict between two goals of American foreign policy.
- FDR in WWII showed strong opposition to empires. He wanted independence for the British and French colonies. This continued after WWII
- American foreign policy after WWII favored containment of communism.

Conflict Continued

- How can these two goals lead to conflict? What happens if a colonialist power is fighting a communist independence movement? Which side would the US support?
- Of course, this isn't just a hypothetical question—it came up in Vietnam.

Vietnam a French Colony

- Vietnam had been a French colony since the mid-19th century.
- At the time of WWII, the nominal ruler was Bao Dai, the hereditary king. Much of the population respected his traditional position, but he was viewed by many as weak and interested in his personal life rather than ruling. He hunted lions and elephants and lived in Paris.

French Colony Continued

- After the German invasion of France in 1940, the new French government, the Vichy regime, favored collaboration with the Germans.
- The Japanese, allied with Germany, stationed troops in French Indochina. The Vichy governor-general had to approve.

Independence

- In 1945, the Japanese took over and declared Vietnam independent. Bao Dai declared himself emperor.
- After the Japanese surrender, a pro-Communist independence movement tried to take over the country. This was called the Vietminh.
- The Communist Chinese supported the leader of this movement, Ho Chi Minh, during WWII. Ho was also in contact with the

Ho Chi Minh

- The Vietminh was led by Ho Chi Minh. (1890-1969). He was a longtime Communist activist and had studied revolutionary tactics in Moscow.
- There have been many disputes about whether Ho was primarily a communist or a nationalist. He was both.

Bao Dai and Ho

- The Vietminh “persuaded” Bao Dai to abdicate and to recognize Ho as head of the Vietnamese government.
- Bao Dai was able to escape and went into exile.
- The French tried to regain control and reestablished themselves in the the Southern part of Vietnam.

France vs. the Vietminh

- The French fought to reestablish control over Vietnam against the Vietminh.
- In 1949, Bao Dai came back as Chief of State.
- The French lost a major battle at Dien Bien Phu in May 1954. The French thought that they could end the war by forcing the Vietminh into a pitched battle, but the Vietminh trapped them with heavy artillery fire. The Vietminh suffered big losses, but

The US and the French

- America could probably have changed the outcome of Dien Bien Phu by giving the French air support.
- Sec. of State Dulles considered doing this, but the Americans wanted the French to agree to give up Vietnam as a colony. The French wouldn't agree.
- Here anti-colonialism in American policy triumphed over anti-communism.

Geneva Accords

- A conference at Geneva in 1954 tried to settle the war. Russia, Britain, the US, France, and Red China were the participants.
- The conference recognized a government in the south, headed by Bao Dai and a government in the North, headed by Ho Chi Minh.

Geneva Accords Continued

- There was supposed to be an election in 1956, to choose a government for the entire country.
- In 1956, the South Vietnamese government refused to participate in such an election, which was thus never held. Neither South Vietnam nor the US had signed the accords, and communist control of the North would have ensured a victory for Ho.

Ngo Dinh Diem

- Ngo Dinh Diem became the Prime Minister of South Vietnam. According to Hilaire du Berrier, *Background to Betrayal*, he was appointed due to pressure from American liberals and socialists who were interested in Vietnam. He and Bao Dai didn't get along.
- Diem called for a plebiscite and proclaimed South Vietnam a republic in 1955. This was probably a mistake, from the point of view of fighting the communists, because it broke with tradition.

Diem Continued

- Diem was an experienced administrator but he had a cold and forbidding personality.
- He appeared to be holding his own for a while against the communist guerilla forces, the Viet Cong, who received support from North Vietnam and were controlled by the North Vietnamese communists

Why Should America Care?

- What we have so far described is a Vietnamese civil war. Why should the US have gotten involved? Vietnam was a small country of very little strategic importance.
- How would preventing the communists from taking it over help defend America?
- The Korean War suggested we should avoid a land war in Asia

Eisenhower and the Domino Theory

- Eisenhower didn't want to send in American troops, but he thought that a communist victory might lead to communist victories in other parts of Asia. This is the "domino theory"
- If the communists controlled China and Southeast Asia, this could threaten Japan and, eventually, the US.

Problems with the Domino Theory

- The domino theory, even considered on its own terms, doesn't work. Probably the fact that a nation has become communist will aid in efforts to communize its neighbors, but the pressure doesn't have to be irresistible.
- Also, the theory ignores rivalries among communist nations. In 1978, Vietnam invaded Cambodia and in 1979, China invaded Vietnam and seized territory in the North.

Further Problems

- The theory rests on two further dubious assumptions.
- First, it assumes that once a nation goes communist, it will remain communist. George Kennan, the author of the containment doctrine, didn't make this mistake. Mises's calculation argument suggests communist governments won't be permanent.

Problems Continued

- Communist governments aren't always hostile; the US and Vietnam now get along fairly well.
- Suppose we set aside these two dubious assumptions. What would then follow?

Suppose the Dominos Fall

- What if all these criticisms of the domino theory are wrong?
- Imagine that the communists seized control of large parts of the world. This need not pose any threat to America's safety. This is parallel to the point made by the 1930s isolationists. The US could still defend itself. We are the most powerful and richest nation.

Diem's Problems

- The Diem government for a while seemed to be holding its own, but it developed severe problems.
- Diem suppressed dissent and kept power within his family.
- Diem and his family supported the Catholic minority, and Buddhists complained of discrimination. There were well-publicized incidents in which Buddhist monks set themselves on fire in protest.

Diem Overthrown

- The American Ambassador Henry Cabot Lodge, strongly opposed Diem.
- President Kennedy was uncertain what to do but he decided to approve a coup against Diem.
- Diem was killed in November 1963, the same month Kennedy was assassinated.

What Would Kennedy Have Done?

- From the point of view of US policy, the Diem coup was probably a mistake. It led to a period of instability.
- The US had about 16,000 “advisers” in Vietnam at the time. This wasn’t enough to enable the not-very-good South Vietnamese army to hold off the Viet Cong. The US could either make a larger commitment or withdraw.

Kennedy Continued

- There is a great deal of controversy about what Kennedy would have done had he not been assassinated.
- Some people think he would have withdrawn American troops. The most extreme version of this view is in James W. Douglass, *JFK and the Unspeakable*, which claims the CIA had Kennedy killed because he wanted to end the Cold War.
- Kennedy was often indecisive, so it's difficult to know what he would have done.

American Escalation

- Lyndon Johnson decided to escalate the war. We now had a full-scale war; eventually, around 490,000 American troops were sent to Vietnam.
- The Gulf of Tonkin incident played some role in the escalation. LBJ claimed that North Vietnamese torpedo boats had twice attacked the U.S.S. Maddox on August 2, 1964. This claim turned out not to be true.

Escalation Continued

- On August 7, Congress passed the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution, authorizing the president to take “all necessary measures”.
- I think that one shouldn't exaggerate the importance of this incident. LBJ would probably have been able to get Congress to approve escalation without it

Why Escalation?

- Why did LBJ and his advisors, such as Sec. of Defense Robert McNamara, escalate?
- It *wasn't* that they were optimistic that South Vietnam could win.
- Rather, the main argument was that if we abandoned Vietnam, American *credibility* would suffer. America had made substantial commitments to our allies. If other nations thought we won't keep our commitments, America's power and security would be adversely affected.

Credibility

- Credibility has to be distinguished from prestige. The point isn't how esteemed the US is, but how much other nations will rely on US commitments.
- On its own terms, it's questionable how much a single withdrawal would affect all other commitments. Some are more important than others.

Credibility Continued

- The credibility argument assumes that it is desirable for the US to have extensive commitments to other countries. But, as mentioned before, the assumption that American security depends on a “friendly” world is questionable.
- Considering the devastation the war brought to Vietnam, other nations might not welcome an American commitment.

End of the War

- In 1968, the North Vietnamese launched an all-out attack, the Tet Offensive. (Tet is a Vietnamese holiday.) They took very heavy losses, but the attack led many in America to think the war was hopeless.
- Nixon decided to withdraw American troops and substitute South Vietnamese troops. He accompanied this plan by bombing of North Vietnam and Cambodia

End Continued

- The Christmas bombing, December 1972, attacked Hanoi and Haiphong,
- North Vietnam, South Vietnam, the Viet Cong and the US signed a peace agreement in January 1973. American troops were to be withdrawn but North Vietnamese troops still in the South were not supposed to undertake offensive operations

Unification

- Congress had turned against Nixon and little aid was given to South Vietnam.
- Saigon fell in April 1975 and Vietnam has been a communist country since then.